Celebrating 40 years of the diaconate
Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

September 14, 2019

40th Anniversary of Permanent Diaconate/Triumph of the Cross
Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo

The year 1979 was a big year. That was the year I graduated from high school! We were getting ready to welcome the new Pope from Poland for his first visit to the United States. And here in the Diocese of Fargo, we saw the establishment of the permanent diaconate. This was a momentous change for the diocese, something entirely new, as it was for the whole Church. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council had called for the reestablishment of the diaconate, and in the years that followed, programs of formation popped up around the country. Our bishops wisely took their time, observed what was being done, and implemented a program here that would suit the needs of this Midwestern diocese.

Today we celebrate the anniversary of that important moment in the life of our diocese. After a time of preparation, the first nine deacons were ordained on December 29, 1979. But we’re doing more than looking back at a particular date or year. We’re really celebrating the gift that the diaconate has been in the diocese of Fargo, and we’re celebrating all of you who have accepted that calling. Whether you were ordained 40 years ago, or just a few years ago, each one of you, and your brothers who have already passed on, has made an unmistakable mark on the life and faith of the Church.

And we cannot celebrate our deacons without also celebrating their wives and families. My dear sisters, this is your celebration too. You accompanied your husband on his path to Holy Orders, and even now you support him and join him in his ministry. As I’ve said before, the diaconate is a team effort. Our deacons have made sacrifices in order to serve the Church, and you have sacrificed with them. We are indebted to you, the families of our deacons, because you have shared your husbands and your fathers with the Church. You too have heard the voice of the Lord, and you have helped our deacons to do what they do because of your own sense of calling, your own place in the life and work of the Church.

It’s fitting that we should celebrate this event in the context of today’s feast, the Triumph of the Cross. It’s safe to say that everything we do as Catholics, as followers of Jesus, we do under the shadow of the cross. We begin our prayers and bless ourselves with the sign of the cross. We place the cross in churches and in our homes, we wear the cross and hold it close to our hearts. The Church’s faith and worship flow from the mystery of the cross. And we recognize the cross not as a symbol of defeat and death but one of victory and life. As Jesus told Nicodemus, the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that those who believe in him might have eternal life.

My brothers, part of your ministry is to proclaim and preach the Gospel to the faithful, but what is this Gospel? At its heart, it is the recounting of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. No matter what passage you proclaim, you are announcing his victory over sin and death. You assist at the altar, which is the sacrifice of the cross re-presented. You distribute the Eucharist, and unite the faithful to the sacrifice of the cross. When you baptize, you baptize into the death of Christ upon the cross, and also into his resurrection. When you visit the sick, you gently put them in touch with Christ who suffered on the cross, but who also rose from the dead and conquered
suffering and death. When you visit the imprisoned, you bring the light of Christ who died into the often dark lives of those who are set apart from society because of some crime or another. You show them that they are not forgotten, that all have a place at the foot of our Lord’s cross. When you reach out to the poor and those in need, you manifest the merciful Christ who died for them upon the cross. You give them hope not just through your personal kindness, but through the power of Christ who made himself poor for our sakes, especially as he hung upon the cross. Brothers, I think we can safely say that your diaconate is inseparable from the cross of Jesus.

How could I not remark on the very meaning of your calling: diakonia, service. Jesus took on the role of a servant, and he calls his followers to do as he did. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve….Whoever would be great among you must become a servant to all.” If this anniversary does anything for us, hopefully it will renew our commitment to a life of service, at the altar but also at the shrine of every life, of every soul we meet. To reign is to serve.

You’re all well aware of the call to evangelization that has gained momentum in recent years, and your diaconal vocation places you at the forefront of that movement. As deacons, you are public witnesses of the Church’s faith, just as Stephen and Philip and all the other first deacons were. My brothers, your role is essential because as deacons you have a capacity to reach some souls that a bishop or priest might not be able to reach. Your life as a deacon in the world might allow you to engage someone who might not know how to connect with a priest. Certainly your liturgical ministry is a form of evangelization, but everything about your diaconal ministry should evangelize. Once again, you are communicating the mystery of the cross in every facet of your diaconal ministry, even if that deepest meaning is seen more by our actions than by our words.

So again, we thank God for his gift of the diaconate and the many who have chosen to follow this calling in the Diocese of Fargo. We are blessed by your dedicated service and your love for Christ and his Church. And we look forward to the day when another group of men will swell your ranks and join you and St. Stephen and St. Lawrence and all the other holy deacons who have dedicated themselves to Christ our Savior.